

IF YOU WANT to see a perfect example of exactly what's wrong with big national chains taking over and consolidating control of local news media, tune your radio to 106 FM, where KMEL once broadcast as one of the most important and groundbreaking commercial stations in the country.

Ten years ago, KMEL, which dubbed itself "the people's station," helped bring hip-hop to the mainstream, helped launch the careers of a number of big local artists, and offered valuable political shows. As Jeff Chang reports, during the mid 1990s, a heated competitive battle between KMEL and KYLD encouraged cutting-edge innovation - and gave local rappers abundant chances to get their music heard.

Then Clear Channel (a giant media conglomerate) bought both stations. The competition ended - and so did the innovation. Local artists were ignored. Public-affairs programming became little more than an afterthought. Today KMEL and KYLD share the same playlists and offer the same sort of drab, predictable material much of the time.